

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 3, 2016**

**SO GREAT A SALVATION  
(OUR DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE)**

**Romans 8:1-11**

I want to tell you, it is good to be part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Many evidences of the EPC's goodness were on display at the annual General Assembly meeting in Northville, MI (just outside Detroit) that ended a week ago yesterday (June 25). Mary Sue and I flew to Michigan a day early in order to see her mother, who lives in an assisted living facility in Ann Arbor, on her 96<sup>th</sup> birthday. We were glad to have the opportunity to visit her, as well as Mary Sue's sister and brother-in-law, both before and after the General Assembly.

An EPC General Assembly is like a family reunion. A big family reunion! And the family is getting bigger and bigger. We now have almost 600 churches in our denomination. The host church, Ward EPC, had a hospitality team of 465 volunteers who handled everything from transportation to meals, to coffee and snacks and giving directions and making sure there were paper towels and toilet paper in the restrooms. They did a tremendous job with a Christ-like spirit.

One thing that makes every Assembly special is the opportunity to reconnect with old friends and to make new friends. In addition to Mary Sue and me, our Faith church family was well represented at the GA by Pastor David and Maryanne Fischler, RE Bruce and Lois Alexander, RE Zelda Artz, RE Alan Smith, TE Helen Franssell, and our brother in Christ, Nico Chantel. Bruce was in the spotlight several times during the Assembly as the chairman of the GA Nominating Committee. Helen is the chairman of the GA's Presbytery Review Committee and presented its report. Alan, as many of you know, is a past-moderator of the General Assembly (1998), and Zelda has served in a number of key roles for the General Assembly over the years.

I want to share with you some highlights from the General Assembly this morning. I think Pastor David told you last Sunday about one of the significant highlights of the Assembly for him. One of the highlights for Mary Sue and me was attending a break-out session on the importance of ministry to college students and the EPC's partnership with the CCO (Coalition for Christian Outreach), an organization with which Mary Sue and I were staff members in the late 1970s. We got to reconnect with CCO President Vince Burens, who led our trip to Israel in June of last year.

Another highlight was the Leadership Institute at which Christopher Yuan and his parents spoke. Christopher is a professor at Moody Bible Institute, but his path to becoming a Bible professor is not what you would expect. Here is some of Christopher's testimony in his own words:

“I had a secret I kept hidden through high school, college, and even the Marine Corps Reserves. Then, when I entered graduate school, I no longer kept it a secret. I came out of the closet.

“I broke the news to my parents and told them, ‘I am gay.’ The news devastated my mother, who was not a Christian at the time. She was confused and angry, but God used it to draw her to Himself. Through a little pamphlet on homosexuality that shared the plan of salvation, she came to realize that if God can love her in spite of her sin, then she could love me, her son. Within a few months, my father became a Christian, as well.

“Meanwhile, I spent most of my free time in the gay clubs and began experimenting with drugs. Eventually, I supported my habit by selling drugs. I thought I could be a student by day and a drug dealer by night, but three months before I was to receive my doctorate, the administration expelled me. So I moved to Atlanta, and became a supplier to other dealers in over a dozen states. In addition, it was nothing for me to have multiple anonymous sexual encounters each day. My parents didn’t know the details of my life, but they knew my greatest need was to make Jesus Christ my Lord. Along with more than a hundred prayer warriors, my mother began to pray: ‘God, do whatever it takes to bring this prodigal son to You.’ In her desperation, my mom fasted every Monday for seven years and once fasted 39 days on my behalf.

“God answered her prayer the day I opened up my door to twelve federal drug enforcement agents, the Atlanta police, and two big German Shepherd dogs. I had just received a large shipment of drugs and was charged with the street value equivalent to 9.1 tons of marijuana. With that amount, I was facing ten years to life in federal prison. I had started with a bright future among society’s finest in academia, and I found myself in the ditch among society’s despised in Atlanta City Detention Center. I called home from jail, and my mother’s first words were: ‘Son, are you okay?’ No condemnation, just unconditional love and grace. Romans 2:4 says ‘God’s kindness leads us to repentance.’ Even on that miserable day, God was pouring out His irresistible grace and drawing me to Himself through the words of my mother.

“Three days later, I found a Gideon’s New Testament on top of a heap of trash ... and read through the Gospel of Mark. I started reading the Bible because I had an enormous amount of time on my hands. But a Bible is not just ink on paper. It is the very breath of God, sharper than any double-edged sword, and it exposed my sin.

“A couple of weeks later I was called into the nurse’s office. They handcuffed me, chained my hands around my waist, and shackled my feet together. I shuffled in and knew something wasn’t right. (The nurse was fumbling) with the words to say and finally scribbled on a piece of paper: HIV+. The days after this diagnosis were dark and lonely. I was sentenced to six years, certainly much better than ten years to life, but the news of my HIV status felt like a death sentence.

“Lying in (bed in my cell) one night, I noticed among the (graffiti) on the metal bunk above me: ‘If you’re bored, read Jeremiah 29:11.’

‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord,  
 ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you,  
 plans to give you hope and a future.’

“At the most hopeless point in my life, God told me that regardless of who I was and what I had done in the past, He still had a plan for me.”

Dear friends, let me pause right here to make sure you know that the same thing is true of you. No matter who you are or what you have done, no matter what secrets may lie in your past or even your present, God still has a plan for you. I came across this quote by Ann Voskamp the other day: “There is always more grace in Christ than there is guilt in us.” It is true. Believe it. His grace really is greater than your guilt and mine.

Back to Christopher’s story: “My transformation was gradual. God was convicting me, but I didn’t want to let go of my sexual identity. I went through every verse and chapter of the Bible looking for the blessing of a monogamous gay relationship. I couldn’t find anything. I also realized that unconditional love is not the same thing as unconditional approval of my behavior. My identity is not gay, ex-gay, or even heterosexual for that matter, but my sole identity as a child of the living God must be in Jesus Christ alone. A decision had to be made: either abandon God and pursue a gay relationship; or abandon pursuing a gay relationship – liberating myself from my same-sex desires – and live as a follower of Jesus Christ. My decision was obvious. I chose God.

“I used to think that to please this Christian God, I had to become straight – I had to become heterosexual – but even those with heterosexual feelings still struggle with sin; that should not be the goal. Our goal, as Christians, no matter what feelings we have, must be holiness. As I began to live this life of surrender and obedience, God called me to full-time ministry while I was in prison of all places. God did another miracle, too – He shortened my sentence from six years to three years, which is almost unheard of in the federal system.”

Christopher was released from prison in July 2001 and enrolled at Moody Bible Institute the next month. After graduating from Moody, he went on to get a Master of Arts in biblical exegesis from Wheaton College Graduate School, and recently he received his Doctor of Ministry degree from Bethel Seminary. He is now back at Moody, teaching in the Bible department, living a celibate life in the power of the Holy Spirit as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a remarkable story, a story that demonstrates the power of the gospel and the beauty of God’s grace. Christopher and his mother Angela have written a book, *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son’s Journey to God, A Broken Mother’s Search for Hope*, which I look forward to reading.

There were other highlights at the Assembly, including rich times of worship and great preaching by Harvey Carey (pastor of an inner-city church in Detroit), outgoing General Assembly Moderator Mike Moses from Lake Forest Church in North Carolina, and evangelist Leighton Ford, brother-in-law of Billy Graham, still going strong in his 80s. Keith and

Kristyn Getty and their band led us in a worship concert on Friday evening that featured several new hymns they have written, including the one we sang a bit earlier in the service (*Facing a Task Unfinished*). New EPC World Outreach missionaries were commissioned at the Assembly. A new partnership with the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico was celebrated. An updated Position Paper on Human Sexuality was presented and approved by the Assembly, calling on all Christians to live lives of holy sexuality to the glory of God, and holding firmly and lovingly to the biblical teaching that homosexuality (like all forms of sexual sin) is contrary to the expressed will of God.

I'm so glad to be part of the EPC family of churches with our commitment to the Bible as the inspired, infallible, unerring, and authoritative Word of God. We are a family that really does try to live out our motto of unity in the essentials, liberty in non-essentials, and charity (love) in all things. As "a denomination of Presbyterian, Reformed, Evangelical, and Missional congregations" (EPC Mission Statement), "the EPC family aspires to embody and proclaim Jesus' love as a global movement of congregations engaged together in God's mission through transformation, multiplication, and effective biblical leadership" (EPC Vision Statement). I know the EPC is far from perfect, and I know it is not the only denomination or place where God is at work, but I am grateful to belong to a denomination where He *is* at work. And I deeply desire the Lord to be at work in and through us in our life and ministry together at Faith.

We're not going to deal with the text in Romans 8 in any detail this morning. We'll go more in-depth next Sunday. But I do want to share one more thing with you today, because I think it beautifully illustrates the triumphant message of Paul that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

On this day before we celebrate America's birthday and once more give thanks for the blessings of liberty, I suggest that you think of Paul's words as a kind of spiritual "Declaration of Independence" from the power of sin and guilt to rule over us or hold us hostage with no earthly hope of rescue or liberation. No condemnation! How so? "Because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set (us) free from the power of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do ... God did by sending His own Son." How? "In (our likeness) to be a sin offering [for us]" (Romans 8:2-3). The result? We are free from sin and guilt and shame. Set free by the same grace, by the same gospel that set Christopher Yuan free.

In Paul David Tripp's new book of daily devotionals entitled *New Morning Mercies*, there is an entry in which he describes "two starkly contrasting scenes, one at the beginning of the Bible and one at the end." Let me share it with you.

"In the beginning scene, we see Adam and Eve quickly clothing themselves and hiding from God in the guilt and shame that is the sad result of their sin (Genesis 3). It is a disaster too horrible to be expressed with the limited words of human language. Blessed with an unimpeded relationship with the Lord, Creator, and King of the universe, blessed with a garden lush with every good thing, they really did have it all. They were made by God and made for Him. Their lives were meant to have Him at the center. They were hardwired to enjoy eternal fellowship with Him. Love for Him and worship of Him were to be the two

principal motivators of all they did. How could this bond be so quickly broken? How could they be afraid of God? How could they try to hide from the One who was the reason for their entire existence? It is too sad to grasp, but the answer to the questions is clear: sin, with its weight of guilt and shame, separated them from God and drove them from the garden of His presence and provision. The bond was broken; how would it ever be repaired?

“The second scene is the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19). It too is a gathering of sinners, but they are not cowering in shame. They aren’t hiding in guilt. They aren’t dreading His presence. They don’t fear the power of His anger. No, these sinners are celebrating because the bond that was broken in the garden has been restored. They have been wed to their Savior forever. Forever they will be in His presence. Never again will they be separate from Him. Never again will they hide. Never again will they be driven away. Their fellowship will never end. The sound of their celebration will never grow quiet. Their robes have been washed to purest white. They are clothed in the righteousness of Another. They are accepted because of Him. There is no condemnation before them. There is no sin that separates them. It is a scene of such outrageous beauty that describing it would stretch human language beyond its limits.

“What has made the difference between these two scenes? Not human wisdom, strength, position, or righteousness. The difference is captured in one gloriously transformational word. Other than the name of Jesus, it may be the most important word in all the Bible: *grace*. Grace in the person and work – the life, death, and resurrection – of Jesus is what made the difference.”

“If you’re God’s child,” says Tripp, “when you sin, you can run toward God and not away from Him, because all your sin is covered by the blood of Jesus.” (Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*, June 29)

Because it is all covered – past, present, and future – there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Nor will there ever be. If you are “in Christ” – if you have placed your trust in Him for salvation, for the forgiveness of your sins, and for peace with Him – then you have been set free from the enslaving power of sin and guilt and shame and condemnation. You are free at last. Thank God Almighty you are free at last and free forever!

Give thanks and praise to God for such a great salvation. Lord, let it be so in us now and always. Amen.